

Mungo Man headed for final resting place, four decades and 40,000 years on

Remains of the first known Australian handed back to traditional owners in sombre ceremony in Canberra



Mungo Man's remains are being transported in a casket made from 8,000-year-old river timber.
Photograph: Dean Sewell for the Guardian

Dean Sewell
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After more than four decades in the custodianship of the Australian National University and later the National Museum of Australia, the remains of the first known Australian, Mungo Man, have begun their repatriation to where they were discovered on Lake Mungo back in 1974.

About 80 traditional owners, department heads from the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage, and museum officials gathered in the baking sun of an industrial complex car park in the Canberra suburb of Mitchell on Wednesday for the handover.

After a ritual smoking of the vintage Chrysler Valiant hearse that will carry the remains of the 40,000-year-old Mungo Man and those of 104 other ancient ancestors back to the Willandra Lakes world heritage area was completed, roller doors were raised to reveal a sombre procession led by Matilda House, who offered a traditional welcome to country.

Speaking at the ceremony was a 64-year-old Barkandji elder, Warren Clark from Mildura, who said: “I’d like to thank all the scientific people, and in particular Jim Bowler, for helping us to understand our people ...

“The journey of repatriation had been an emotional one for me,” he said, wiping his brow and pointing across the expanse of the desolate car park. “This is not home for me, it is not home for our ancestors, either – and I’m sure their spirits won’t rest until they are buried back on our land.

“Today holds great significance for the Barkandji clan and other tribal groups. When I arrived this morning, my stomach was bubbling with emotion ... Our people have had enough, it is time for them to go home.”



The remains of Mungo Man and the bones of 104 ancient ancestors were delivered back to the traditional owners. Photograph: Dean Sewell for the Guardian

Present and also along for the three-day repatriation journey was Dr Jim Bowler, 88, the Australian National University geomorphologist who discovered the remains of Mungo Man on 26 February 1974.

“It is an amazing day and a privilege to be part of,” he said, adding: “A man of my age could fall off the perch at any moment – I’m running out of time.”

Humour aside, Bowler admonished authorities for the near-collapse of the repatriation process. “There was huge neglect from the state and federal governments,” he said. “If there was a message left behind by Mungo, it would be learning from each other.”

Holding back emotion, the Mutthi Mutthi elder Auntie Mary said: “We are relieved but it is also a sad day for our people ... We’ve worked with the scientists, we’ve walked

together. It's what we are about, connection to our country, looking after our rivers, looking after our land and looking after our people."

The remains of the ancient ancestors were held in a dozen or so boxes and had to be methodically stacked into the hearse, the last space being reserved for the casket containing Mungo Man, crafted out of 8,000-year-old river timber donated by Bowler.



The smoking ceremony to purify the hearse. Photograph: Dean Sewell for the Guardian

A coach load of traditional owners will follow the remains on a three-day trip through Wagga Wagga and across the Hay Plains to Balranald and on to Lake Mungo where on Friday they will hold a public ceremony. Then a select group of traditional owners will take the remains to an undisclosed location for a private burial.

As the hearse pulled out of the car park, a raised fist appeared from the driver's window, a sign of relief and exaltation that Mungo Man is on his last journey to his final resting place.